

# SIMON CAMERON

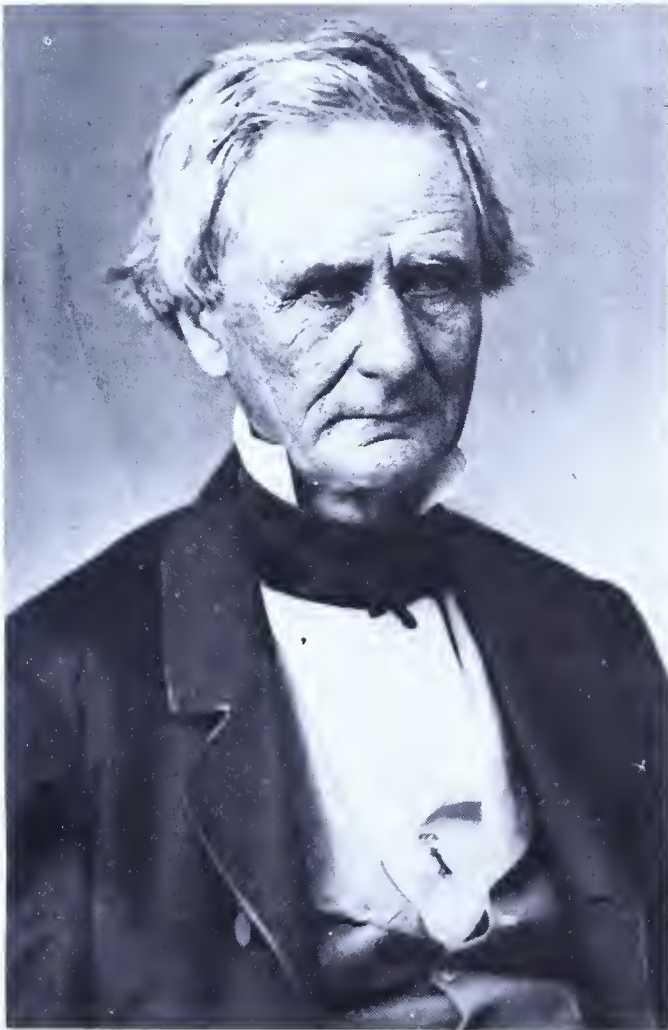
**S**IMON CAMERON, the most politically powerful man in mid-nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, was born in the Lancaster County village of Maytown, March 8, 1799. The third son of a poor tailor, descended from Scotch Presbyterians, he was to set the course of Pennsylvania politics for nearly a half century.

When he was six, Simon's struggling family moved to Sunbury. When he was eleven he was apprenticed to the town's leading physician and at seventeen to the editor of the *Northumberland Gazette*. A year later—1817—he

went to Harrisburg and began a short but successful career as newspaper editor and owner, becoming the leading Democratic journalist in the capital and an influential editor west of Philadelphia. Political favor came to him early: in 1822 he was chosen to be State printer, and in 1829 he was appointed adjutant general of the State militia by Governor Shulze, his sister-in-law's brother. Though he served but two years, he was known as "General" to the end of his life.

Although he had been a Calhoun Democrat, Cameron switched his support in 1828 to Andrew Jackson, Calhoun's opponent for the presidency. Four years later at the first national convention of the Democratic party, Cameron helped to swing enough votes to nominate Jackson's Vice-President, Martin Van Buren, as a presidential candidate. Cameron also persuaded a fellow Pennsylvanian, James Buchanan, to seek a Senate seat and helped engineer his election. In 1838, at Buchanan's suggestion, President Van Buren gave Cameron the responsibility of reimbursing the Winnebago Indians of the Wisconsin Territory for lands taken from them by the federal government. Cameron was accused of cheating the Indians, charges that were never proved, but the scandal followed him through life.

Best known as a politician, Cameron was also a success in business. In 1826 he undertook the building of a section of the Pennsylvania Canal along the Susquehanna River. He was then asked in 1831 to organize the construction of a canal from Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River at New Orleans. The following year he received the charter for the Bank of Middletown, of which he was cashier. With the backing of his own bank, he embarked on railroad building. In 1834 he asked James Buchanan to be president of one of the railroads, the Lancaster and Portsmouth, which ran from Lancaster to Middletown, where it joined the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. In December,



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*For the decade after 1867, Cameron dominated Pennsylvania's political scene.*

1860, he leased the Lancaster and Portsmouth line to the Pennsylvania Railroad Company for 999 years at \$82,000 per year, to be paid to Cameron and his stockholders.

In 1845 Cameron first sought election to public office. That year President James K. Polk persuaded Buchanan to leave the Senate and become his Secretary of State. Cameron decided to win Buchanan's seat in the Senate by defying his own party. The national Democratic party promoted low tariffs and free trade, while Cameron proposed higher import duties to protect Pennsylvania industry against foreign competition. Confidently he challenged his party's choice before the General Assembly and was elected by a coalition of opposition Whigs and high-tariff Democrats. This cost him many of

his friends in the Democratic party, in particular the President.

He served in the Senate until 1849, when he was defeated. In 1857 he again opposed the choice of the Democratic party and was elected by a coalition in the General Assembly calling itself the Republican party, a coalition of Native Americans, Free Soilers, Whigs, and high-tariff Democrats.

Eighteen-sixty was a presidential election year and to the Chicago Republican convention the delegates from Pennsylvania brought the name of their favorite son, Simon Cameron. His support was negligible, so a deal was made with Abraham Lincoln's aides to give Pennsylvania's convention votes to the Illinois hopeful. As payment the aides promised Cameron a post in the Cabinet. When Pennsylvania swung to Lincoln at the convention, many of the smaller state delegations followed its lead. Lincoln was disturbed by the deal made with Cameron, but for reasons of politics appointed the Senator as Secretary of War.

Lincoln and his cabinet took office in March, 1861, as the national crisis deepened and civil conflict threatened. Cameron became Secretary of War at a most critical time, and his performance during ten months as head of the War Department has been criticized and defended. The war came quickly. On April 13, Fort Sumter, in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, was seized by the Confederates. Lincoln responded with a call for 75,000 volunteer troops. It was Cameron's responsibility to supply and equip this force, to provide transportation, and to organize his Department for war. The military capacity of the United States government at the beginning of the war was woefully inadequate.

As Secretary of War, Cameron made some questionable appointments, and was charged by critics with serious mismanagement. There were also charges of corruption in the awarding of contracts; Cameron himself was accused of profiting from the war by diverting traffic to his Harrisburg to Baltimore railroad. Cameron further aroused opposition by suggesting to the President that the slaves within territory



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*Simon Cameron as a rising power in Pennsylvania politics and commerce. Portrait by an unknown artist.*



held by Union forces be freed and that former slaves be used as troops. The President and the Cabinet, however, feared that to arm them would further divide the nation and rejected the idea. Yet times change and two years later Lincoln, realizing the political gains that could be made, accepted the proposal and put it into effect.

Beset by opposition, personal antagonism, and military setbacks, and under censure by the House Committee on Government Contracts, Cameron resigned as Secretary of War in January, 1862.

The President then appointed Cameron to fill the vacant post of Minister to Russia. In St. Petersburg the new Minister was received at the court of the Czar, Alexander II, whom he congratulated for freeing the serfs, declaring that Lincoln would soon free the slaves. He gained the support of Russia for the Union, a crucial decision which was one factor influencing France and Britain against entering the war on the Confederate side.

By January, 1863, Cameron had returned home to seek election to the Senate from Pennsylvania. The Democrats had a majority of one in the legislature and so Cameron used all the influence he could to win a majority for himself. He failed in his attempt and was accused of bribing one, and possibly two, of the Democratic legislators. However, the State Attorney General, a Republican, chose to ignore the charges and Cameron never came to trial.

Cameron obviously would have to find a way to strengthen his influence in Pennsylvania. He was out of office in 1864, so he offered his services to the President during the re-election campaign that year. Because Cameron started a letter-writing campaign in support of the President, a movement to dump Lincoln was thwarted. In his gratitude, Lincoln consulted Cameron regarding federal appointments in Pennsylvania and placed loyal Cameron men in influential positions. Although out of office himself, Cameron was building his base of power.

After Lincoln's death in 1865 the new President, Andrew Johnson, continued Lincoln's policy regarding appointees. But Cameron saw that

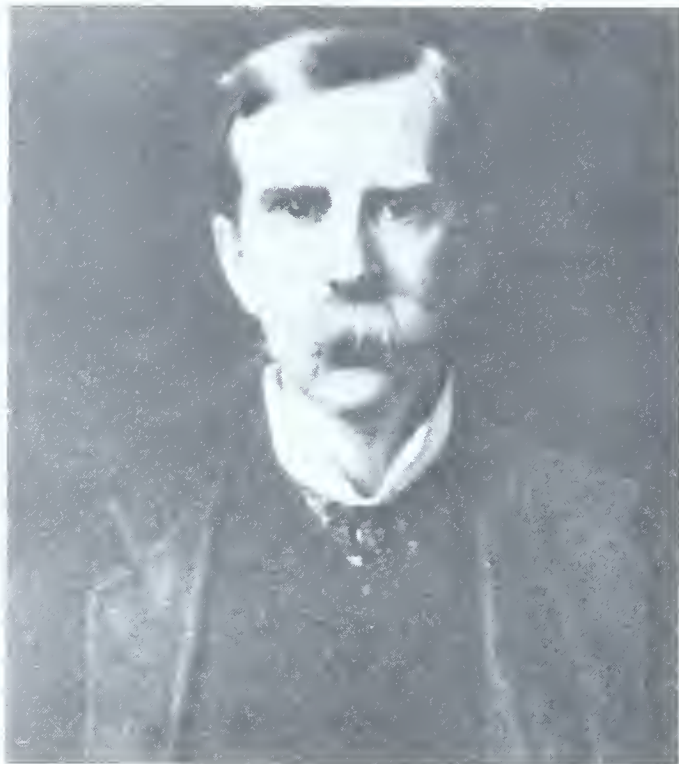


*Cameron residence, Harrisburg, about 1885.*

Johnson's popularity was slipping among the Radical Republicans who controlled the State and who wanted a sterner policy toward the South. Cameron decided to abandon the President and see to it that a man of his own choosing was elected governor of the State. This occurred in 1866 when Democratic influence was so low that a Republican victory was assured. Cameron gained control of the Republican caucus and had an ally, John Geary, nominated and elected.

In 1867 Cameron ran again for the U.S. Senate. He had to defeat his archrival and wartime governor, Andrew Curtin, to win the nomination and gain control of the Pennsylvania Republican party. Cameron managed to win a majority of the caucus votes and the nomination, and with the Democrats out-numbered almost two to one, he was elected. He emerged as the leader of the Republican party in Pennsylvania; a Cameron would manage its politics for decades to come.

In the Senate Cameron pushed hard for higher tariffs, making himself the major exponent of the protective tariff from the leading protectionist state. In 1869 he joined forces with the most powerful transportation monopoly in the State, the Pennsylvania Railroad, and succeeded in having a Cameron man, John Scott, a former railroad counsel, elected Senator from Penn-



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*J. Donald Cameron, heir to Simon's political empire.*

sylvania. Cameron now had amassed enough power to decide Pennsylvania's representation in the United States Senate. In 1871 Cameron, on the basis of seniority, succeeded to the chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He remained there until his retirement.

Back in Pennsylvania he picked up a new lieutenant in Matthew Quay, a powerful man from western Pennsylvania, who along with Cameron's son and political heir, J. Donald, would control Pennsylvania politics into the twentieth century. In the 1872 gubernatorial election, Cameron's man won over a coalition of Democrats and Andrew Curtin's Liberal Republicans by "waving the bloody shirt" to remind the voters of the Republican role in preserving the Union. The Curtin followers were finished after twenty-five years of fighting Cameron, for in the following year Simon Cameron was returned to the Senate unopposed by any Republican in Pennsylvania.

In 1875 his chief concern was a political office for his son. Donald had never run for public office, but he moved easily through political circles as his father's mouthpiece and right-hand man. A Democratic majority in Pennsylvania in 1875 made impossible Donald's election to the Senate, so Simon urged President Grant to appoint Donald to his Cabinet. While he was negotiating for his son's future he scored a personal triumph when Congress, by unanimous vote, withdrew its censure of 1861. He could now retire with his name cleared and, if his plans succeeded, the reins of power in the hands of his son.

In May, 1876, Donald became Secretary of War and assured the election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes as President. Donald sent federal troops to the three southern states whose votes would decide the contested election. For this he expected an appointment to the Hayes Cabinet, but Hayes refused him. According to Cameronian politics it was the height of ingratitude.

Simon saw clearly what he must do to continue the Cameron dynasty. On March 12, 1877, he tendered his resignation to the Pennsylvania legislature. The following day the Republican caucus unanimously nominated J. Donald Cameron for the seat. A week later he was elected to the Senate by a majority of the Assembly, tagged by its critics as the "Cameron Transfer Company."

Simon retired to his newly purchased farm at Donegal Springs in Lancaster County, a few miles from his birthplace, and spent the last years of his life supervising the growing of tobacco, entertaining his old political friends, and traveling. He died there of a stroke on June 26, 1889, at age ninety. With his passing a significant chapter of Pennsylvania history came to a close. He left behind a large fortune both political and monetary to his son Donald, the political based on a patronage system held together by personal loyalty to one man, Simon Cameron.